

Departing Air Force Officer Organizes Critical LAD Meeting

Contributed by Mike Tharp
Monday, 19 December 2005

DEPARTING AIR FORCE OFFICER ORGANIZES CRITICAL LAD MEETING FOR REGIONAL EMERGENCY FIRST-RESPONDERS

One of the last things USAF Col. Bill Baird did for the District turned out to be his best.

Two weeks before his tour of duty as Air Force Liaison Officer in Los Angeles ended Sept. 30, Baird organized and spearheaded a unique meeting of area emergency management professionals in the District Conference Room.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Baird brought together key federal, state and local authorities to discuss the resources and capabilities available in case a similar disaster happened here. Specifically, Baird wanted each agency to leave the room knowing the main contact person at other agencies--to be able to put a name and face and phone number behind the monolith of governmental acronyms responsible for public emergency response.

His timing couldn't have been better. The very next day after Baird's meeting, the lead story in the Los Angeles Times carried the headline, "Southland Not Ready for Disaster," a dissection of the region's preparedness for a Katrina-sized emergency. The article quoted some of the people who had attended Baird's meeting. That Sunday's edition of the Daily Breeze, which covers LA's South Bay, led with "Ready for the Big One?" another analysis of the area's readiness to deal with disaster.

Even the cover story of that week's edition of the alternative newspaper "OC Weekly" reviewed the deadly 1938 flood which wiped out one-third of Orange County. (That flood led to the District's busiest and most ambitious period of dam-building, such as Prado and Santa Fe, and flood control projects, such as LACDA.)

So Baird was prescient in recognizing the need for SoCal first-responders to share face time and swap business cards, frequencies, wavelengths and bandwidths. Present were some 20 reps from the Federal Executive Board, FEMA, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Secret Service, California National Guard, California Office of Homeland Security, the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, the LA County Sheriff's Dept. and the LA Fire Dept.

Lori Brown, special agent in charge of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Office of Investigations and one of three Primary Federal Officials (PFO) in Los Angeles, attended. A PFO is the on-site representative of the Dept. of Homeland Security.

Besides Baird, District team members included Deputy District Engineer LTC Mark Blackburn; Joe Dixon, International and Interagency Support manager in the Phoenix office; SGM Jeff Koontz, District security manager; Jennie Salas of the Phoenix Public Affairs office, and Bob Lofts, now in Information Management but an active participant on the District's post-Northridge earthquake recovery team in 1994. Bijan Nooranbakht gave the group a tour of the District's Emergency Ops Center (EOC chief Ed Andrews was already on the Gulf Coast, helping the Katrina relief effort), and Brian Tracy did the same for the District's Reservoirs Ops Center (ROC).

After the meeting, Kathrene Hansen, executive director of the Greater Los Angeles Federal Executive Board, applauded Baird's "leadership in recognizing the importance of multiple government offices at the local, state and federal level working together. Having the relationships and contact information before you need them is critical to a successful response to a disaster. Many agency representatives get so caught up in fulfilling their day-to-day operations that they forget to take the time to make the relationships that will help us all perform better in the future."

Appropriately enough, Baird opened the meeting by pointing out where the floor's emergency exits were, "to the right and down the stairs." He continued, "We prefer to meet at Figueroa and Wilshire; if you don't find your buddy, let me know."

Citing his recent experience at March Reserve Air Force Base in shipping 80,000 Marines and 17,000 tons of supplies out to war zones and back aboard 757s, Baird asked the group: "How do we maximize the effectiveness of the Corps for any of you so you know what our capabilities are? So when everything is falling down around you or allegations are coming in the swamp--excuse the pun--you know what we can do."

Most experts agree that the three most formidable emergency challenges that could face southern California are earthquakes, a terrorist attack or a tsunami.

Clearly, no one at the meeting wanted anything like the chaotic response along the Gulf Coast to recur in Los Angeles. LA Fire Dept. Capt. Kevin Nida had just returned from two weeks in Mississippi. "The devastation was incredible," he recounted. "There was nothing to connect to in terms of interoperability because there was no infrastructure left. The only communication we had was with satellite phones. Don't even think about using a cell phone in an emergency disaster. I've never been on a deployment where we literally had nothing to work with."

If a buzzword emerged from the day-long session, it was interoperability.

Citing one example to dramatize the need for a common communications frequency, LA Sheriff's Dept. Robert Sedita, commander of tactical services, recalled that at a recent shooting incident at a Moorpark hospital, "11 shoulder patches (jurisdictions) pulled up," most of them searching for suspects in the dark, unable to communicate via radio with one another.

During the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Sedita said, a U.S. Marine detachment was attached to a group of LA Sheriffs deputies. "Cover me!" means something completely different to a Marine from what it means to a deputy," he pointed out, and the Marines opened up with a 50-caliber machine gun on an apartment building; fortunately, nobody was hit.

"We need commonalities of terminology," he added. "We can't talk in code. They (first-responders) fall right back in the language patterns they're used to." On 9/11, for instance, for New York City police officers "Evacuate!" meant to get out of the area; to firefighters, it meant rescue people.

In the Gulf Coast immediate aftermath, Coast Guard and Air National Guard crews used different radio frequencies, and neither land lines nor cell phones worked. "The worst thing we can do is not talk to each other," Baird insisted.

Mark Flath, a supervisory information technology specialist with the Secret Service, told the group what his agency had been doing to assure uninterrupted communications for emergency responders at all levels. He said that interoperability of radio, landlines, wireless, satellite and computer communications were key to the success of any operation.

Dixon reminded the participants that the Corps has "redundancy capability" if Los Angeles went down. "All the Corps services are available in the Phoenix office or San Francisco," he said. The District team also showed a PowerPoint presentation of the Corps' capabilities and resources which, along with the tour of the EOC and ROC, let other officials know that the District could provide another command post option. "We're engineers, planners, designers, constructors," Dixon said.

Also giving PowerPoint presentations were Col. Greg Peck commander of the Los Alamitos Joint Forces Training Base, and Capt. Paul Wiedenhoft, A Coast Guard deputy commander. Los Al, for example, has two airfields, "one longer than John Wayne and able to bring in Air Force 1," Peck noted. The Naval Weapons Station at Seal Beach also features a railhead and deepwater port. "Even if the freeways are down, we can get you in and out," he said.

"The killer is getting all this information to a central point," said Baird. "If we can get a bulldozer to clear a road to a nursing home itself, we can get people out. If I can't talk to you, I can't be effective. We're here to help you. What can we do for you? Our job is to figure out how to get it to you."

During the EOC and ROC tours, Lofts informed the group that their agency could get CNN and the Weather Channel free via satellite "if you're involved with FEMA support."

Hansen of the Federal Executive Board said knowing that "was a great piece of information that I plan to pass along to all the federal agencies that I work with." She added that she had "also made many additional contacts that will help me do my job better in the future. I was very impressed with the preparedness and sophistication of the Army Corps operations."

Col. Bill Baird would consider that "mission accomplished."